**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAERA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vaera begins with God’s promises assuring *Benei Yisrael* of redemption even after Moshe’s initial confrontation with Pharaoh resulted in his intensifying their burden of labor. The Torah relates that Moshe conveyed these promises to the people, but they were too physically and emotionally shattered to accept his assurances (6:9).

*Sefat Emet* (5639) comments that although *Benei Yisrael* rejected Moshe’s message of hope and promise, this does not mean that his conveying this prophecy was useless. He writes: “The Almighty…commanded [Moshe] to tell this section to *Benei Yisrael*, even though they would not listen…[because] nevertheless, some slight impact definitely remained with them from these words.” Although the people responded to Moshe’s prophecy with rejection, the message he conveyed did have some impact upon them, however slight. *Sefat Emet* adds: “Some slight knowledge exists in a person’s heart, and God, who examines the thoughts and heart, understands this thought which the person himself is incapable of sensing.” There are stirrings of the heart, and realizations of the mind, which we cannot perceive, but which indeed occur and have an impact on our growth and development. We do not always see the positive steps forward that we take, or notice our personal growth or heightened understanding. There is so much about ourselves that only God, the “*bochein kelayot va-leiv*,” who knows everything about our thoughts and feelings, is aware of. And so He sent Moshe to deliver His promises of redemption despite knowing that the people would not accept them – because He knew that this message would have a slight impact, and even a slight impact is significant and worthwhile.

*Sefat Emet* here teaches that we should not feel discouraged when we sense that our attempts to grow, improve and learn are unsuccessful. Every piece of information we learn, and every sincere thought of introspection and resolve, impacts us in some way. Growth is not always outwardly discernible, and it does not need to be outwardly discernible to be valuable.

*Sefat Emet*’s comments also convey an important lesson relevant to education. The effects of a parent or educator’s efforts are not always apparent, and very often, they will not be apparent until many years later. Even when it appears that the messages taught and conveyed to children and students are rejected, this does not necessarily mean that they have had no impact. We must do the best we can in educating our children, and improving ourselves, and trust that as long as our efforts are sincere, they are having a positive impact, however slight, and that even a slight impact is precious and valuable.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (67b), famously cited by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Vaera (8:2), tells that the second plague visited upon the Egyptians – the plague of frogs – actually began with but a single frog, which then rapidly multiplied into countless frogs which overwhelmed Egypt. On this basis the Gemara explains why the Torah uses the singular form “*tzefardei’a*” (“frog”) in reference to the onset of the plague (8:2), but elsewhere speaks of the “*tzefarde’im*” (“frogs”) that filled the country.

Rashi, based on Midrashic sources, adds that the Egyptians tried to eliminate this frog, but each time they struck the frog, it produced offspring. The Egyptians repeatedly struck the frog, causing it to continue reproducing, until eventually Egypt was overrun by frogs. Many later commentators noted that this description accurately – and perhaps amusingly – depicts the irrationality of anger, how angry reactions evoke additional hostility. Sadly, people very often continue “striking” those who have provoked them, despite knowing that these “blows” only cause more damage. Like the Midrashic depiction of the Egyptians mindlessly striking the frog, people sometimes persist in their grievance and rage even though this only bring upon themselves greater harm.

Additionally, however, this depiction might serve to illustrate the mistake made by the Egyptians in their decision to enslave *Benei Yisrael*. As we read earlier, in Parashat Shemot, Pharaoh felt that drastic measures were necessary to curb *Benei Yisrael*’s population growth, and so he subjected them to slave labor. The Torah famously relates, “*Ve-kha’asher ye’anu oto kein yirbeh ve-khein yifrotz*” (1:12) – the more oppression *Benei Yisrael* endured, the more they reproduced. And thus when the Midrash speaks of a frog rapidly producing offspring in response to the beatings it suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, it perhaps seeks to illustrate Pharaoh’s folly, thinking he could diminish *Benei Yisrael*’s size through enslavement, which ultimately proved t have the precise opposite effect.

We might also suggest that this depiction perhaps points to the common phenomenon of attempts to solve what was a tolerable problem ending up causing an intolerable situation. Sometimes we try to be too perfect, and rush to the single “frog” – minor dilemma or annoyance – in an attempt to eliminate it, but in so doing, we make more problems for ourselves. If we insist on addressing every minor “frog” in our lives, we might likely find ourselves unnecessarily beset by challenges and complications that could have been avoided. Often, the “frog” we confront is far less damaging than the issues that arise in our frantic and persistent attempts to eliminate it. The Midrash here teaches us to think carefully in determining which “frogs” we need to try to remove from our lives, and which are best left alone and tolerated.

Monday

Before the onset of the seventh plague, the plague of hail, God commanded Moshe to appear before Pharaoh and warn him that “*ka-eit machar*” – “at this time tomorrow” – an unprecedented, destructive hailstorm would devastate Egypt (9:18). Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, writes that when Moshe said the words “*ka-eit machar*,” he made a mark on the wall, and predicted, “Tomorrow, when the sun reaches here, the hail will fall.” According to the Midrash, Moshe’s prediction that the plague would strike “at this time tomorrow” was intended to be perfectly precise, to the point where Moshe drew a mark on the wall guaranteeing that the plague would strike when the sun reached the spot the following day.

Rav Yosef Salant, in his *Be’er Yosef*, observes that the Midrash comment would seem to point to a miraculous feature of the hail (beyond its other miraculous features) – namely, that it descended from the skies when the sun shone. After all, the Midrash describes the sunlight reaching a certain point on the wall when the plague struck, suggesting that there was sunlight. Normally, of course, dark storm clouds cover the sky before and during the fall of rain or other precipitation. In this instance, however, as part of God’s manifestation of His unlimited power, which transcends the natural forces, He brought a destructive hailstorm from a clear, sunny sky, without any cloud cover. (This point is made also by Maharil Diskin.)

We might wonder whether this particular aspect of the plague of hail was simply a demonstration of God’s unlimited might, or if perhaps there was some particular significance to the fact that the hail fell directly from the sky, without any clouds. If we would want to find a symbolic meaning underlying this aspect of the plague, we could perhaps point to the Gemara’s famous comment that the Egyptians enslaved *Benei Yisrael* “*be-feh rakh*” – “with a soft mouth” (Sota 11b). The Torah uses the word “*parekh*” to describe the labor imposed upon *Benei Yisrael* (Shemot 1:13), and according to one view in the Gemara, this word is actually an acrostic representing the words “*peh rakh*,” alluding to the fact that the Egyptians deceptively lured *Benei Yisrael* into becoming slaves. They began by offering handsome rewards and extending friendship in exchange for their service, and once the people were enlisted, they were then trapped, forced to perform slave labor. This deception, perhaps, is symbolized by the image of the sunny skies from which God produced the devastating hail. The Egyptians showed *Benei Yisrael* “sunshine” – friendship, kindness and generosity, but this “sunshine” was fake and insincere, intended to break and destroy the people. Just as the clear sky, which normally produces pleasant, comfortable conditions, proved destructive, the Egyptians’ warm, kind gestures to *Benei Yisrael* were actually harmful, intended to ensnare them.

We must ensure that the “sunshine” we extend to other people is always genuine and sincere, truly intended to dispense kindness, and not a phony display of goodness to cover for selfish motives.

Tuesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Vaera (8:8) that after the second plague that descended upon Egypt, the plague of frogs, Moshe “cried to the Lord regarding the matter of the frogs” – referring to Moshe’s promise to Pharaoh that he would end the plague the following day. God accepted Moshe’s prayer, and the frogs died at the designated time.

A number of commentators raised the question of why the Torah speaks of Moshe “crying” to God to end the plague – an expression not used in regard to the end of any other of the ten plagues. Why specifically did this plague require Moshe to “cry” and beg God to kill the frogs?

One possibility is offered by Seforno, who notes the Gemara’s comment (Sanhedrin 64a and elsewhere) that “half is not given from the heavens” – meaning, God generally does not normally grant a “partial” request. Moshe wanted God to eliminate the frogs only partially – as he asked that the frogs in the river would remain (“*rak ba-ye’or tisha’arna*” – 8:7). As God does not generally grant such precise requests, this request required an especially intense, impassioned prayer, and the Torah therefore describes Moshe as “crying” to God to eliminate the frogs.

*Siftei Chakhamim* offers a different answer, explaining this term (“*va-yitz’ak*”) to mean that Moshe needed to raise his voice. As the *Shulchan Arukh* rules (O.C. 101:2), it is proper when praying to recite the prayer audibly, such that one can hear the words (but not loudly). During the plague of frogs, *Siftei Chakhamim* writes, the noise of the frogs croaking throughout Egypt was deafening, such that Moshe needed to shout so he could hear the words of his prayer. For this reason, the Torah writes, “*Va-yitz’ak Moshe*” – that Moshe “shouted” to God.

Rav Shraga Schneebalg, in his *Shraga Ha-Meir* (7:139), references *Siftei Chakhamim*’s comments in addressing the question of whether a hearing-impaired individual must pray loudly so he can hear the words. The *halakha* in this case would appear to hinge on the conceptual question of whether the requirement is to actually hear one’s words, or to recite the words in a manner that is audible under normal conditions. *Siftei Chakhamim*’s remarks regarding Moshe’s prayer might indicate that one must actually hear the words recited, such that Moshe needed to “shout” so he could hear his prayer over the din of the frogs’ croaking. If so, then a hearing-impaired individual, too, might perhaps be required to pray loudly so he could hear the words he recites.

However, Rav Schneebalg refutes this proof, noting that other explanations exist for the Torah’s description of Moshe’s prayer to end the plague of frogs. Beyond the other suggestions offered by the commentators, Rav Schneebalg proposes that Moshe needed to “shout” so his voice would be heard over the ruckus of the frogs in order to make it clear that his prayer is what brought an end to the plague. As the purpose of the plagues was to demonstrate God’s unlimited power, it was necessary for Moshe to publicize his prayer, to show that the plague was ended by the Almighty, and not by any other force.

As for the final *halakha*,Rav Schneebalg rules that since the *Shulchan Arukh* writes explicitly that one may not raise his voice when praying, and that one who does not hear his prayer nevertheless fulfills his requirement, an individual with hearing impairment should not pray loudly, and should instead pray quietly without hearing the recitation. When it comes to the recitation of *Shema*, however, which also is to be recited audibly (*Shulchan Arukh*, O.C. 62:3), one should recite the text loudly enough that he can hear it. (Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz, in [*Ma’adanei Asher*, Parashat Vaera, 5779](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/32_14_79.pdf), cites those who disagree, and require even for prayer reciting the text loudly enough to hear the words, even if one has a hearing impairment or is praying in a place with background noise.)

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the question addressed by several commentators regarding Moshe’s prayer to God to end the second plague that He brought upon Egypt – the plague of frogs. Pharaoh frantically summoned Moshe and Aharon, and begged them to petition God to put an end to the plague. Moshe responded by inviting Pharaoh to choose when he wanted the plague to end – presumably, to demonstrate God’s unlimited power, and to prove that this was not some natural occurrence which Moshe accurately predicted. Pharaoh said he wanted the plague to end the following day, the Moshe then left the palace and “cried to the Lord” (8:8), pleading with God to eliminate the frogs at the time Pharaoh wanted. God accepted Moshe’s plea, and ended the plague the next day. A number of commentators raised the question of why specifically in this instance the Torah speaks of Moshe “crying” (“*va-yitz’ak*”), indicating that he desperately pleaded to God, something which he did not feel compelled to do during any of the other plagues.

A number of commentators suggested that Moshe “cried” because he was requesting something additional, beyond that which was planned or expected. Malbim (expanding on the theory proposed by Seforno, which we mentioned yesterday) writes that whereas the other nine plagues ended completely, Moshe made a special request concerning the frogs – “*rak ba-ye’or tisha’arna*,” that the frogs in the river should remain (8:7). According to Malbim, these “*tzefarde’im*” (“frogs”) which spread throughout Egypt were actually a new creature that had never existed previously. Malbim arrives at this conclusion based on the verb “*sharatz*” with which Moshe predicts the river’s producing the “*tzefarde’im*” (7:28) – the same verb used in reference to God’s creation of sea creatures (Bereishit 1:20-21). This parallel, Malbim writes, indicates that God brought a new creature into existence, just as He had done at the time of the world’s creation. And, since these were new creatures which came into existence specifically at this time to punish the Egyptians, Moshe wanted some to remain as an eternal reminder of this miraculous plague brought upon Egypt. He therefore “cried” to God and begged that although the plague was to have been eliminated entirely, God would allow the “*tzefarde’im*” in the river to remain alive. (Malbim’s comments touch upon the broader issue as to what the “*tzefarde’im*” actually were. While it’s commonly assumed that they were frogs, Rabbeinu Chananel and Abarbanel maintained that they were deadly crocodiles. Malbim (7:27) writes that this plague included both – frogs which left the river and spread throughout the country, and crocodiles which remained in the river as a frightening commemoration of this plague.)

Abarbanel explains that Moshe had presumed that the plague of frogs – like the first plague, the plague of blood – was to have lasted for seven days, but Moshe nevertheless boldly assured Pharaoh, on his own, that the plague would end when Pharaoh wanted, without waiting seven days. He therefore pleaded with God to grant his wish and end the plague earlier than it was to have ended.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains along generally similar lines, though he emphasizes the fact that Moshe’s response to Pharaoh marked the first time Moshe acted towards Pharaoh independently, and not as God’s agent. Until now, Moshe spoke to Pharaoh only that which God told Moshe to speak. But during the plague of frogs, when Pharaoh summoned Moshe to the palace, Moshe made the independent decision to promise to end the plague when Pharaoh wished, without having been told by God when and how the plague would end. Rav Hirsch thus suggests that because this was Moshe’s first independent act, which entailed a degree of risk, he “cried” to God, begging Him to fulfill his word to Pharaoh.

Thursday

Parashat Vaera begins with God’s response to Moshe after he questioned why God had sent him to Pharaoh, which had the effect of worsening *Benei Yisrael*’s condition, rather than achieving the goal of releasing them from bondage. God said to Moshe, “I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov as ‘*Kel Sha-ddai*,’ but I never made known to them my Name, *Y-H-V-H*.” Rashi explains that God here criticized Moshe for questioning Him, contrasting Moshe with the patriarchs, to whom He made promises which they never saw fulfilled, and yet they did not complain or question His actions. According to Rashi, when God told Moshe that He never appeared to the patriarchs with the Name, *Y-H-V-H*, this means that He never overtly showed them how He fulfills His word – which is signified by this Name – and they nevertheless placed their full trust in Him.

Rashi does not explain how the Name of “*Sha-ddai*” is relevant in this context. Why is it significant that God appeared to the patriarchs specifically with this Name?

The Gemara in Masekhet Chagiga (12a) comments that the Name “*Sha-ddai*” refers to the fact that “*amarti la-olam dai*” – God “said to the world: Enough!” The specific connotation of “*Sha-ddai*” is delimitation and the designation of boundaries, God’s limiting the size and contents of the universe. This Name is associated not with God’s creating the world, but specifically with His stopping the process of creation, His setting limits on existence.

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, suggests explaining on this basis the particular relevance of the Name of “*Sha-ddai*” to the context of God’s response to Moshe in the opening verses of Parashat Vaera. God here was telling Moshe that the patriarchs felt content with what God gave them, even if they had been promised more. They followed God’s example of “*Sha-ddai*,” of limitation. Just as God set a limit on creation, so did they accept the limits on what they possessed and enjoyed. Their lives were not an insatiable quest to expand. Like God Himself, they recognized the limits of their world, that people need to be able to say, “Enough” and feel content with whatever they have been given.

Rav Sacks suggests explaining in this vein the request we make in the *Aleinu* prayer, asking that God bring us the final redemption “*le-takein olam be-malkhut Sha-ddai*” – so that the world will be “repaired” under the rule of “*Sha-ddai*.” We mention this specific Name of God, Rav Sacks explains, because the world’s ultimate “*tikkun*” (“repair,” or “perfection”) will be achieved when all people embody the quality denoted by “*Sha-ddai*,” the quality of contentment, of accepting limitations. As long as we are plagued by chronic dissatisfaction, by the constant desire to accumulate more, without ever feeling that we have enough, the world cannot reach the state of “*tikkun*” that we hope for. To “repair” the world, we must develop the mindset of “*Sha-ddai*,” of joy and contentment, accepting limitations and recognizing that we do not always need more than what we have.

Friday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Vaera the message God commanded Moshe to deliver to *Benei Yisrael* after his initial effort to release them from bondage resulted in Pharaoh’s intensifying their labor. Moshe conveyed to the people God’s promises of redemption, but, as the Torah tells, “they did not listen to Moshe, due to [their] shortness of spirit and hard work” (6:9). God then told Moshe to return to Pharaoh and demand that he release *Benei Yisrael*, and Moshe responded, “But the Israelites did not listen to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me?!” (6:12). Moshe argued that if his promise of redemption was rejected by his own people, then certainly Pharaoh will reject his demand to release *Benei Yisrael*.

Many commentators raised the question of why Moshe felt that *Benei Yisrael*’s rejection of his message to them indicated that Pharaoh would reject Moshe’s message to him. After all, the Torah specifically attributed *Benei Yisrael*’s dismissal of Moshe’s assurances to their “shortness of spirit and hard work.” Why would Moshe assume on this basis that his demand to Pharaoh would also be dismissed?

A creative reading of this verse is suggested by Rav David Tzvi of Neustadt, in his *Chemdat David*. He explains that Moshe was not making an *a fortiori* argument that if he was ignored by *Benei Yisrael*, then he would certainly be ignored by Pharaoh. Rather, Moshe realized that *Benei Yisrael* needed to be moved and inspired, if only slightly, in order to be worthy of redemption. He argued that if he was unsuccessful in uplifting *Benei Yisrael*, in eliciting positive change, then he would not be successful in his mission to secure their release, because *Benei Yisrael* needed to earn their freedom through heightening their spiritual awareness to at least some extent.

Implicit in this chassidic reading of the verse is the premise that even when we are beset by “shortness of spirit and hard work,” challenged by difficult conditions, whatever they may be, we are nevertheless capable of some sort of positive change. According to Rav David Tzvi of Neustadt, it was clear to Moshe that although *Benei Yisrael* had a very valid reason for refusing to heed his message, nevertheless, they would not be worthy of redemption without taking a step forward. This is because all people, in any situation, are able to, and expected to, try to be a little better. Certainly, the “shortness of spirit and hard work” that we face, the various trials and tribulations that we confront over the course of life, might require us at times to set modest expectations for ourselves. However, under no circumstances are we ever absolved from striving to advance one step forward, to make at least some slight improvement, and become just a bit better than we are currently.

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